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English Literature (XV-XVII centuries)

15 January 1.991

Humour characters' destiny in Every Man in His Humour and The Alchemist

The plots of some of Ben Jonson's early comedies have as their basis the theory of humours. This theory is based on a particular meaning that the word "humour" acquired in the Renaissance. According to this, a mentally unbalanced man can be possessed by one or more certain affected facets of his character. These facets can make the characters become involved in similar extreme situations. But the final development of the plot holds a different destiny for each kind of humour character.

In Every Man in His Humour, the characters are possessed by various kinds of humours that are represented in some way by innate defects. This is why they are called true humours. They are not acquired vices because a man can have any of them from the moment of his birth. Their origin is in the genes, so they are natural and can be hereditary. Kno'well's humour is over-concern. He represents the know-all father and is sceptical and interfering with regard to his son. He thinks that experience cannot be wrong. Kately's humour is over-jealousy. He is a kind of restless husband and is obsessed by the idea of his wife's unreal adultery. He is not a peaceful person because of his distrust, as he says himself: "No greater hell, than to be slave to fear."

(Every Man in His Humour, III, ii, 138). The third character analyzed is Downright, whose humours are irascibility and being too categorical in his judgements. Psychologically, the humours of these characters belong to an innate behaviour which has its origin in natural impulses.

In The Alchemist, the characters are possessed by various types of humours that are represented by acquired defects. This is the reason why they are called adopted humours. They are described as vices because no man can have any of them when he is born. Their origin can be found in the man's natural freedom to choose between good and evil. Subtle,

Mammon, and Drugger choose evil. Their humour is covetousness in every case. Subtle is also a miser and this makes him betray even his comrade Face: "And take our leaves of this o'erweening rascal, / This peremptory Face." (The Alchemist, V, iv, 78). They want to become rich at any price, even at the expense of their fellow-men. Psychologically, the humours of these characters are due to an acquired behaviour which has its origin in bad habits.

There is a certain character in each play whose function is to change the humour characters' circumstances. They use every kind of trick to deceive people. They are the rogues. But their purposes differ in each play. In Every Man in His Humour, this mission is carried out by Brainworm. He is presented as an intriguer, but the tricks he plays are well-meaning. He wants the humour characters to realize their defects and to change their attitude. His main objective is to look after the welfare of his fellow-men. This is completely the opposite of what Subtle does in The Alchemist. Like Brainworm, he is presented as an intriguer, but the tricks he plays are intended to enrich himself at other people's expense. He only wants to be rich and to look after his own interests and injures his fellow-men notably. Thus, his tricks have a bad aim.

These tricks have some final consequences in the characters. Similarities and differences can be found between the plays analyzing the humour characters' destiny. In the two plays, the situations in which the characters are involved are the result of their own defects. In Every Man in His Humour, Kno'well becomes victim of his scepticism, Kitley realizes that his distrust is unjustified and Downright finds that his certainty and self-confidence have no firm basis. In The Alchemist, Subtle, Mammon, and Drugger, all become involved in the unfortunate results of their own greed. However, the plays are different with regard to the individual destiny of the characters. In a kind of final judgement they are treated according to their role in the development of the action.

The characters of Every Man in His Humour are innocent of their acts. The humours of these characters vary between

two points of imbalance. Kno'well and Kitely's behaviour tends to be based on an extreme mistrust, while Downright is excessively self-confident. An explanation to this can be found, taking into account the ancient Greek philosophy, in which the Renaissance authors of ethics based most of their arguments. Aristotle takes the line that man is an entity which is made up of passional limits. There is a point of equilibrium between these passional limits which is called "the golden mean" or "the happy medium". This point can be reached by the balanced man. Thus, these characters' type of personality can be defined as involuntary. Their conduct is derived from the world of instincts. When some element of this part of the mind is wrong, man has involuntary defects. This is what happens with Kno'well, Kitely, and Downright. They do not realize their defects because they think they are right. These mistaken attitudes constitute man's natural imperfection. They have diseased minds and because of this they are not conscious of their acts. In this sense, Brainworm is who knows how to put them right. Through some extreme situations in which the characters are involved, he makes them realize their mistaken attitudes. The final result of his tricks is that they have a brief period of suffering, which is nothing compared to the suffering they felt when they had their characteristic humours. Kitely, for example, does not become a peaceful man until he purges all his unjustified jealousy. The humour characters' defects disappear.

The characters of The Alchemist are guilty of their acts. The humours of these characters are caused by their pursuit of welfare above all. Subtle, Mammon, and Druggier's behaviour tends towards crime. Aristotle, again, gives an explanation to this. According to Greek philosophy, the other part of which man as an entity is made up are the rational limits, which are good and evil. However, there is no point of equilibrium between these rational limits. A man has freedom to choose one or the other. Though it is possible for a man to do right or wrong at a specific moment, this is due to an impulse and is considered fortuitous. This play's characters chose evil and they reached moral imbalance, corruption.

So, these characters' type of personality is voluntary. Their conduct is derived from the world of will. When man takes unethical decisions, he acquires vices. This is what happens with Subtle, Mammon, and Druggier. They know what they are doing is bad but they keep on doing it. This behaviour corresponds to man's ethical imperfection. They have tainted minds and that is why they are conscious of their acts. Thus, Subtle himself is made an instrument of destiny to punish the vices, even his own ones. Through the development of the action, they realize that evil leads nowhere. But the humour characters' defects do not disappear in this play. Destiny gives them a chance of reforming to recover from their humours, but their humours do not disappear because there is no cure without willpower. That is why they are self-punished. Their own actions condemn them, and there is no worse sentence for these covetous men than to remain poor: "O my voluptuous mind! I am justly punished." (The Alchemist, IV, v, 74).

Thus, the characters' final destiny is different in each one of these two plays. Jonson becomes the only just judge of the actions, giving purgation or punishment, depending on the charges. In Every Man in His Humour, the characters are sick in some way and they need a kind of treatment. The author gives them purgation and through this, their natural defects are purified. However, in The Alchemist, the characters are not sick; they are corrupt. Jonson gives them punishment, but a very special one. It is their own wicked actions that self-punish them.

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